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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000088

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, NEA/IPA  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: SYRIAN FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN SEES  
NO CHANCE FOR PEACE WITH ISRAEL WITHOUT U.S. INVOLVEMENT

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1  
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11. (C) Summary: Suleyman Hadad, Chairman of the Syrian People's Assembly Foreign Affairs Committee, told us January 26 that Syrians were eager to restore good relations with the U.S. Suleyman rolled out familiar Ba'ath Party talking points on Israel's "rejection of peace" and the need for armed resistance. But he also went beyond standard propaganda in his analysis on Syria's complicated relations with Iran, Hizballah, and Hamas. Hadad pressed for the return of an American ambassador to Damascus and urged the Embassy to be active in cultivating ties. He confided the SARG wanted to help the embassy resume normal operations and predicted we would be seeing positive signs soon. End Summary.

12. (C) In a January 26 courtesy call on Hadad, Charge and Pol/Econ Chief visited the Syrian People's Assembly for the first time in their tours here. Charge had met Hadad at a UK Embassy reception three weeks earlier, and at Hadad's invitation, we submitted a dipnote to the MFA requesting an appointment last week. MFA Protocol notified us January 25 that the appointment had been approved. After 20 minutes of pleasantries, Hadad willingly engaged in a frank exchange on the Gaza crisis, U.S.-Syrian relations, returning to the Golan track, Iran, and Hamas.

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Syria Ready for U.S. Engagement  
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13. (C) Hadad, a former diplomat who served as Syria's Ambassador to Germany and then as Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs before retiring in 2003, greeted us enthusiastically. He said he had met the previous day with FM Moullim, who had expressed support for the Charge's call on the Syrian parliament. Hadad stressed that Syrians liked Americans in general; the past eight years represented an anomaly due to the previous administration's "misguided" policies. Hadad reported he had heard President Obama's inauguration address and believed the U.S. was now "on the right track." Obama had sent important, positive signals to the Arab world in his January 25 al-Arabiya interview. Hadad referenced President Asad's positive remarks aired the same day announcing Syria's desire to engage the U.S. (Comment: Bashar's language was slightly more confrontational about the possibility of peace.) Damascus was keen to re-establish better relations with the U.S., Hadad emphasized, because we have common interests in cooperating. Syria looked forward to having an American ambassador return to Damascus, he added.

14. (C) Charge replied no decision had been made on returning an ambassador but the matter was under review. She noted we had reported Bashar's contention that "Peace without Syria would be impossible." Hadad said President Asad had spoken the truth. He maintained Syria had expressed its interest in peace with Israel for decades, while Israel had ignored at least a dozen UN Security Council resolutions and continued to occupy Arab land. Israel's military operations in Gaza were only the most recent example of Israel's disregard for human life in the name of national defense. "Over a thousand Palestinians, mostly civilians died in Gaza. How many Israelis died as a result of Hamas rocket attacks?" Hadad asked, saying that the rocket attacks were Hamas's expression of dissatisfaction with Israeli "strangulation" of the Gaza population.

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Syrian Relations with Hamas  
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15. (C) Responding to Charge's questions about Syria's relationship with Hamas, Hadad said Syria had tried to convince Hamas to exercise restraint, but that Israel's Gaza operation had left Hamas leaders with little choice. Hadad charged that Israel's indiscriminate killing of women and children had only emboldened extremists. Charge countered that Hamas bore some of the responsibility for hiding in civilian buildings and using human shields. Hadad responded that continuing occupation of Arab territory and reliance on military intimidation of the Palestinians was driving

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populations to embrace extremism.

16. (C) Hadad reported that Syrian security services had made several arrests of al-Qaida affiliated individuals in Syria trying to go to Gaza. By comparison to al-Qaida elements who were establishing a foothold in Gaza, Hamas represented a reasonable and democratically-elected voice. Hamas leader Khaled Misha'al had implicitly recognized Israel by proclaiming Hamas's acceptance of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders. Syria had worked in the past on Hamas to take positive steps in reconciling with the Palestinian Authority.

But the situation was complicated by deep divisions within the Arab world, part of which supported America's position and part of which opposed America's strong alliance with Israel. President Asad had been consistent in his support for Hamas's right to conduct armed resistance against Israel's illegal occupation. But Syria was open to the idea of reconciliation with Saudi Arabia after Saudi King Abdullah's positive gestures at the Arab Economic Forum in Kuwait. Bashar might visit Saudi Arabia if the Saudi King formalized his invitation. Egypt, he said, "would be more difficult" because of Gaza.

17. (C) Hadad argued the roots of the problem in Gaza and the occupied Palestinian territories came back to Israel's unwillingness to adhere to existing UNSC resolutions. If Hamas were to recognize Israel, Israel would still refuse to accept 1967 borders and Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state, which would collapse any chances for peace. The U.S. should play a role in promoting the 2002 Arab League initiative. Convincing Israel to accept the 1967 borders and share Jerusalem would be impossible without U.S. influence. Other issues, such as the right of return, might become more manageable if Israel accepted these two pillars. Israel had nothing to fear from the Arab world or Palestinians if it were willing to accept the general framework of the Arab League Peace initiative, Hadad insisted. The alternative was more violence, an apartheid state, and/or attempting to wipe out millions of Palestinians.

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Iran-Hizballah

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¶18. (C) Charge suggested that Israelis were not necessarily afraid of Arab countries as much as they were of Iran. Hadad responded that peace was important for the region. Syria was a poor country because it necessarily spent some 40 percent of its annual budget on defense against Israel. It had no choice but to ally with Iran. A comprehensive regional peace would remove Syria's need for a strategic defense relationship with Tehran, Hadad contended. Moreover, Hizballah would eventually become a purely political entity if peace were achieved.

¶19. (C) Asked why Hizballah had refrained from opening a second front against Israel during the Gaza crisis, Hadad responded that Syria had urged restraint. Syria assessed that Hizballah action would be unnecessary unless Israel went too far in Gaza. Opening a second front in southern Lebanon also risked inflaming Lebanon itself. Did Iran agree with this reasoning? queried Charge. Hadad replied Syria told Iran it did not want to escalate the situation because doing so would have risked sparking a regional war that would have served no one's interests. Iran and Israel were not historic enemies, he suggested. But Israel's undeniable flouting of international norms had made it an enemy of everyone in the region. Eventually a regional war would come unless the U.S. engaged the region and used its influence to change Israeli behavior, Hadad argued

¶10. (C) Comment: Hadad's willingness to receive us is one indicator of the SARG's cautious optimism about the prospect of better relations with the U.S. His hard-headed malign of Israeli policies as the core cause of all regional problems represents a institutionalized mindset that we will encounter when and if we do engage seriously. Hadad's somewhat rehearsed doctrinaire responses to tough questions was offset by his warm and welcoming manner.  
CONNELLY